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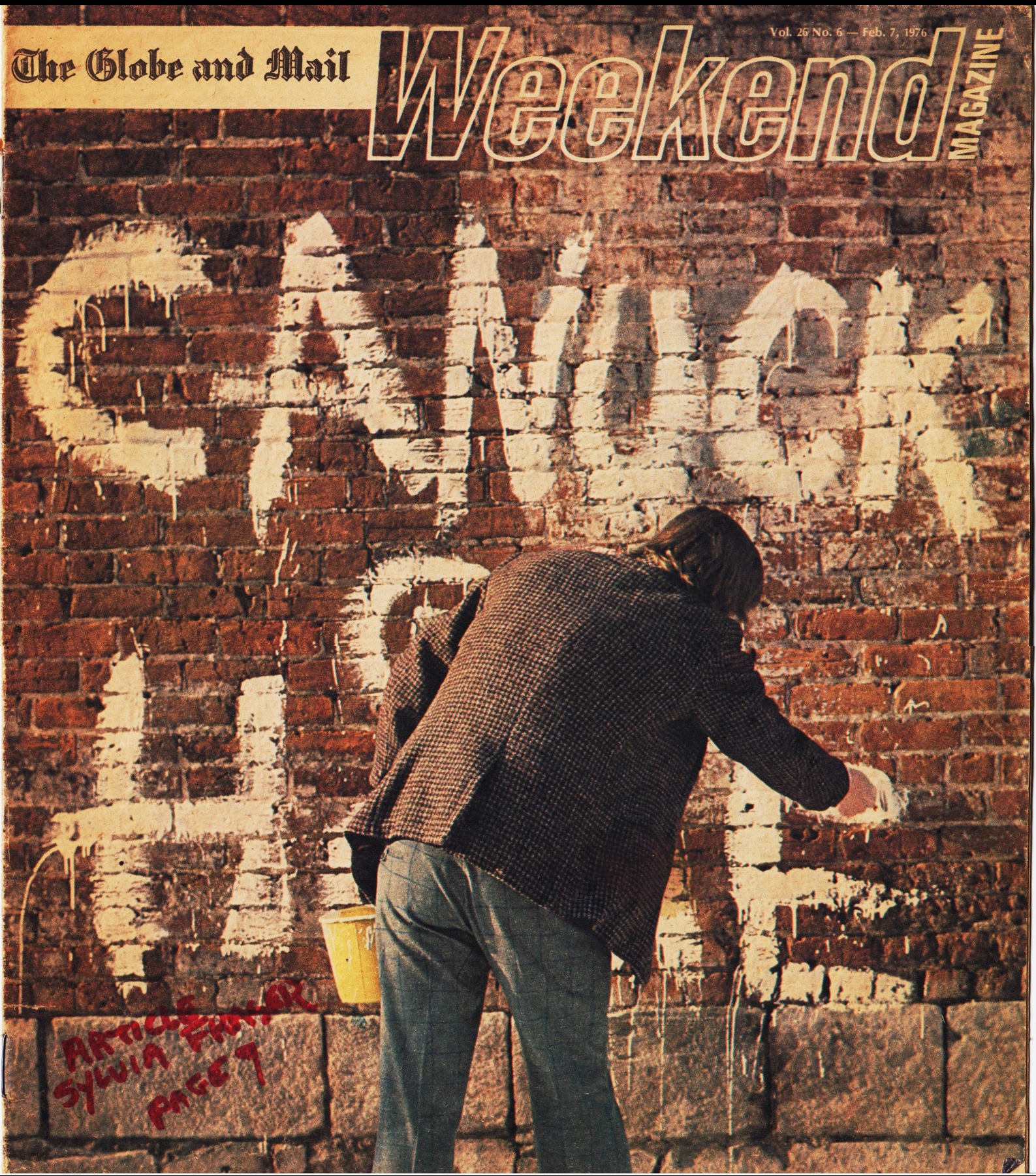

ARTICLE BY SYLVIA PAGE 7

HEATHER COOPER

IN THE PALACE OF THE SNOW QUEEN

Changing, shedding, polishing her glittering image

By Margaret Drury Gane / *Illustration by Heather Cooper*

IT IS JUST a trick of light, the burning backdrop of an autumn sunset, that gives the old Toronto house the foreboding look of a Hitchcock set. A turret juts blackly on the left; a crescent of stained glass in the main floor window seems more sinister than saintly. Shoved far back from the street on an untended lawn, the house suggests a place kids would pass by on Halloween, or approach only on a dare.

But when Sylvia Fraser opens the door to her first-floor apartment, the contrast is momentarily dazzling, and lines from Pandora fly into my head: *White! An explosion of white! We are in the Palace of the Snow Queen!* White walls, here and there scratched by one of the twin Siamese cats, an ice-sheer glass dining table, crystal paperweights, a chesterfield that looks like soft snow shovelled against one wall. In the corner, on a display shelf, I see a glass polar bear thrusting his transparent head past rows of greenery. Without that mass of growing plants, the place might look cold, perhaps impermanent. Fraser, however, is gracious, hospitable and elegantly gowned. A beige and cream knit dress falls full-length, almost hiding the highrise platform shoes that jack her up from the tiny woman she seemed when we met briefly two years ago. They make her a Wagnerian five feet seven, with pewter blonde hair and extraordinary marble-blue eyes.

The face that the painter Harold Town describes as "a sense of the skull trying to get through" is not the soft-focus image that stands out from white hair on the book jackets. Although she is reluctant to admit her age, she looks the 40 years she eventually reveals, and better than in the fairy-tale photo on the jacket. Her strong-boned, slightly willful face suits the woman: stubborn, intelligent, compulsive and haunted, with 11 years of journalism and two best-selling novels behind her, a coterie of well-known friends, and enough eccentricities to make her a highly visible and controversial author.

Fraser has a penchant for publicity, much of which she herself sets in motion, with the considerable heft of the McClelland and Stewart publishing company behind her. Her first book, Pandora, was well received, both here and in the United States, by critics and readers. Words like "innovative, irrefutably humorous, a stunner" brushed aside a couple of dissenting opinions. More controversy arose over the second book, The Candy Factory, which has been called everything from a brilliant breakthrough to pretentious trash. It shocked a few of Fraser's friends and lost her a few readers, too. While the Toronto Star's Roy MacSkimming gave it a thoughtful, generally favorable review, mentioning "scenes of inspired invention — deceitful masks torn away and horrors bared," D.L. Aiken of the Winnipeg Tribune wondered sadly at the surfeit of malevolence, insanity, rage and lust that fill the book: "Is this how the world and people really are? Always have been? No hope? No possibility of dreams coming, true?" Though some critics have claimed to discover glimmers of optimism in Fraser's bleakly savage work, Aiken's reaction more closely relates to that of the average reader, the person who cannot manipulate all the symbolic convolutions nor make sense of perverted sensuality. In reply, Fraser simply says she is not an entertainer. Then she adds fuel to the uproar by claiming that The Candy Factory begins "where Erica Jong's Fear Of Flying stops," which isn't going to hurt the sales. And in an astonishing bit of blurb on her publisher's biographical release, she even reviews her own book, claiming with unabashed self-praise that it is "darkly tomorrow — there's nowhere it fears to go and nothing it fears to do — it will have a very interesting publishing history."

Sylvia Fraser is the younger daughter of a Hamilton steel mill worker, the "bad" girl who hated hand-me-downs and laid out what she terms "a very unhappy childhood" for everyone to see, including her family, in one short shattering burst of a book.

"I went a little crazy writing Pandora, she admits. "I found I couldn't stand to wear colors, that I had to put on white, or black. The whole thing was a form of psychoanalysis that left me sort of shell-shocked. It's a very personal book, and reliving my childhood certainly wasn't easy. But I'm grateful for one thing. My parents were determined that my sister and I would get the best education. It was assumed we'd go to college. I wasn't just smart, I was exceptionally smart, so it was *understood* from as far back as I can remember. I regarded that as a right, an inheritance." After high school, she left home for London's University of Western Ontario, emerging from "a self-imposed monastic existence" four years later with an Honors BA in English and philosophy.

She came to Toronto "ready to bust out in a celebration of life," only to be turned down by Maclean's magazine because she failed the typing test given to her. "I learned later that they were hiring people like Peter Gzowski instantly off The Varsity, but the fact that *I'd* edited my university's paper didn't seem to matter: I'd failed the typing test."

The expression of sympathy coming to my lips is swept away in a torrent of words and a flashing face-wide smile: "But *wait!* Let me tell you how that worked to my advantage in the end. Most men were advanced too quickly, so that they thinned out, had to backtrack later. *Because* I took a desk job at the Star Weekly and did it so well, I wasn't encouraged to advance too fast. In fact I was bribed, no, *flattered* into staying where I was, *not* to get ahead, and in the end I caught up with them. It came out even."

Gzowski, who was to work with Fraser at the Star Weekly later, seemed not surprised to hear of this. "Let's just say it's typically Fraser," he declared. "*Wrong.* I didn't leap from The Varsity to Maclean's. In fact, I'd been a full-time reporter, edited a small newspaper, contributed freelance articles to them before they hired me. But Sylvia's right about the feminine put-down thing. Women had a much harder time getting ahead. Christina Newman and Barbara Moon went through the same business. There were plenty of bright young people, male and female, with degrees in their hands ready to besiege magazines, and it was more difficult for women."

Fraser is rolling quickly now, eating up tape on the recorder so ravenously that I know there will have to be two interviews. It was Harold Town who commented that "talking to Sylvia can be like trying to board a train going 60 miles an hour while you juggle a suitcase in each hand."

"I began on the copy desk at the Star Weekly for $60 a week and was told not to let anyone know my salary because they'd be jealous! After a five-year engagement, I married Russ Fraser. I certainly didn't want to settle for the job I was in, so I began submitting articles written on my own time. The first one published was Housewives Are Self-Centred Bores, which brought in bags and bags of hate mail. People were really upset, and I was floored by the reaction. But only at first. A later article on my reasons for deciding *not* to have children really raised a storm, from readers and people I knew. People would corner me at cocktail parties and get really nasty, as if I were a threat. Men were particularly hostile, called me a castrator and things like that.

"But wait. Let me show you how ironic this all is. Much later, when zero population growth became popular, the same people who had criticized my personal views did a complete turnabout. Suddenly I was a minor cult figure being congratulated on my courage and insight, and I learned something from that: I tend to get a negative reaction to a lot of what I say until five or 10 years later, when I'm proved right. Then people say, 'Sylvia now I understand. Now I know what you meant then, so criticism like that doesn't bother me any more."

Somehow, the people who knew her in the Star Weekly phase don't come across as worshippers at the knee of a Wiser Prophet. Isobel Ledingham was the women's editor at the time, and her picture of Sylvia is of someone far more mortal. "I saw her riding on the subway before I even knew she would be working with me, and I was fascinated by this woman with the white hair,

Continued

Rationally and coolly she discusses shedding family, husband and old friends. It's difficult to tell whether she ever shed a tear

flamboyantly dressed, talking to her friend about the upcoming wedding. You really couldn't help but overhear Sylvia. She was going to wear a white gown covered in red polka dots, and planned to cut out red plastic dots to paste on her shoes! She was always one mesh stocking ahead of the fashion. She had the first wig, I think. Later, when she and Russ had that posh white penthouse, I think there was some resentment around that they could afford to be the swinging couple, no kids and two salaries. But no one could fault her hard work. She's a super-achiever, and if she was sometimes a prima donna, she made up for it by the quality of work she turned out."

Claiming Fraser's "gross immaturity was the first twinkling of women's lib," critic Kildare Dobbs remembers that she called him courtly but condescending. "I don't think she was too pleased with my review of her first book. I haven't read the second one, but I can't accept her as a novelist. I thought her a very pleasant person whose glossy image tended to put people off." By the time the Star Weekly folded, Fraser had hand-hewn a reputation as a solid, in-depth journalist, though detractors suggest that prize-winning profiles on Harold Town and Pierre Berton may have softened the way to the publishing of Pandora by Jack McClelland. It is an allegation that brings a shard of anger to her eyes.

"Look, this has been laid on me so often I'm sick of it. Let's get it straight. Peter Gzowski did not invent me. Jack McClelland did not invent me. My so-called powerful friends come after the fact. I don't go after them. OK? When I decided to take a couple of years off to write the book, I had built a considerable reputation as a journalist. I was *known*. If my book did not have to go through the usual long process of acceptance by a publisher, it's because people already knew what I could do. I feel I *earned* that entrée on the strength of 11 years' hard work."

Autobiographical, reality in a fictional setting, Pandora has, in Fraser's words, "the hint of madness that makes a good novel." If the public loved it, they must also have wondered how Fraser's family reacted to the savage personal portrayals.

"Well, my family had been very happy about my journalistic career. They could show my articles around proudly, talk about the places I went and the interesting people I knew. But my books were something else. Pandora disturbed my mother very much, but because she has infinite respect for authority, and the critics liked it, she regarded it as bringing home a good report card. If *they* liked it, it was OK by her. My father only made one comment. He said that he could see how *some* families might have a generation gap! I've come to the conclusion that my family doesn't understand my books."

Her older sister disagrees. "There were parts of the first book I really enjoyed, things we'd both gone through, places and people I recognized instantly. What is harder to understand is *why* Sylvia feels she was so hard done by as a child. Within their means, my parents were generous. My father found it difficult to express his emotions. He tried to make up for it by making sure we had as much as other people's kids. If I got a lipstick or nail polish, Sylvia got them too. Our childhood was no more awful than it was for most children of our time. But Sylvia has always tended to see herself as a fairy princess, left on the doorstep of an unfeeling house. She was spoiled, held her breath to get her way, and she usually got it. It's really a little sad. But, you know, the business of not wanting children is true. She hated dolls. I once gave her the old-fashioned kind with a hard composition head. I got my first black eye when she whacked me with it. The funny thing is she is really great with my children, and they adore her. The visits are rarer now, and for me personally difficult, because there is something artificial there, a barrier. If just once she'd come in ordinary clothes. But she wears a hat when she comes, and it stays on right through the visit."

All around the Fraser apartment are reminders of her first success. Two original drawings, done by Town for the book, hang on the walls. A rough lamppost dividing the little kitchen area from the living room displays two street signs found by a friend: Pandora Circle, Pandora Street. Another friend returned from a visit to Mexico with a ceramic *Hola*, roughly translated as "hello," the word that crops up many times in the book. There's even an embroidered Pandora on a couch pillow. No reminders so far of The Candy Factory, which Fraser says "wrote me out of a happy marriage."

Her separation from Russ Fraser, after 15 years of marriage and 20 of close friendship, seems to be the direct result of Fraser's career and the growth that accompanied it. "I don't think that it's a coincidence that most serious women writers have broken marriages," Fraser says. "I found myself feeling so guilty, wanting to work to my own schedule, trying to fit into his. Always under pressure. In the end, it became too difficult. It certainly put a strain on Russ, too. Nobody should ask a partner to go through that. Living with a writer is like asking someone to live with a sick or insane person." The breach was widened, too, by the fact that her friends were now coming from a glittering group of successful media people. Her husband's more traditional friends, it has been suggested, paled by comparison. Russ Fraser, who fought the separation all the way, still finds the subject painful 18 months later. "Essentially, I think Sylvia was always a loner. She has to go her own way." When I asked him if the questions, under the circumstances, were too rough, like pulling a Band-Aid off a hairy chest, he said, "No, like pulling off the chest itself. You see, I'm not a part of Sylvia's *now*."

Sylvia Fraser's now is a transition period, stripped down, and by comparison to the high life she led before, only moderately glamorous. Her courage is evident in the fact that she left the marriage with only a few personal things, would not accept support from her husband, and refused to write a sequel to Pandora which would probably have pleased both her publishers and the public. "She's a lady in a gilded cage with a chain saw in her hand," comments Town. "It took guts to throw over that expensive penthouse, the whole stereotyped version of success, and someone as incredibly supportive as Russ has been. Then opting to skip an easy sequel to do The Candy Factory, a very tough book."

In fact, a lot of people couldn't stomach that tough book. Charles Templeton views the second book as "throwing down a gauntlet, as if she were going to prove a woman could outdo a man in writing obscenity. But I suspect that under that independent surface there's a rather insecure person."

A librarian said that the book is frequently returned half-read. "People are sickened by it: name the sin or the crime and there's a chapter to match." More than one reviewer was fooled by the sweet coating on the advertising promotion that preceded its publica-

tion. At a celebration party given for her by close friend Anna Porter, the executive editor at McClelland and Stewart, Fraser joined a hundred guests in downing smoked salmon, rare roast beef and Brie cheese. Because the décor underlined the candy theme, seven-pound Hershey bars were prizes for roulette-playing gamblers. Not all the celebrating went that well. According to a representative of the publisher, Rowntree's, who had been approached to supply boxes of candies to accompany review copies of the book, backed away hastily when one of the executives thought he should read the book first. McClelland and Stewart had no choice but to photograph the author in a Shopper's Drug Mart, nibbling liquid cherries.

None of this seems to ruffle Fraser, at least professionally. The more fuss, the more publicity, and she has publicly stated that she wanted this book to be more threatening. On the other hand, she was in tears when her mother decided she would read it. "I just couldn't handle that, so I forbade her to read it under any circumstances." When I suggested that this was a bit like ordering a person not to look in the hall cupboard while she was away — they'd almost be compelled to, out of curiosity — Fraser shook her head. "No. I explained to her that it was simply too tough, that I couldn't deal with her reaction. I wasn't going to explain or apologize, I couldn't be responsible. I think she was relieved."

The second interview is more comfortable, though she has surprised me at 10 AM by appearing at her door in full make-up, a floor length white pleated skirt, and a candy-striped pink top. She tells me that, unlike most people, she loves cocktail parties: "You can skim along the surface, flitting from one person to the next, until you find someone worthwhile; it saves so much time." Clothes are not a problem, since she doesn't require much in the way of daytime wear. "I can look good on very little money. What other people spend on jeans will get me a pair of satin pants."

Books don't make enormous sums of money for their authors, and lately Fraser has been freelancing — a lecture here, an interview there, some work on the text for a new McClelland and Stewart book on summer homes. She has time to see friends, and regrets nothing of the past. "I've come to the conclusion that it's virtually impossible for me to make a wrong major decision because I give so much time to looking at things from every possible angle before I move," she says. That statement is backed up by the fact that she really does not worry about the future ("Something always comes along"). She teeters slightly on the huge heels a friends finds "not particularly likable — she's a petite lady." Her sister sees "the height thing" as a kind of Freudian reach-for-the-top that surfaced 25 years ago. "She'd wear these thin spiked heels on a very long walk to school, and come back with raw, bleeding feet."

Is there anything she's afraid of, if pain can be endured for vanity? Fraser admits that a debilitating illness would frighten her, "not necessarily because one couldn't move around, but because it might be disfiguring." Getting old? Death? "I really believe in a person's right to end her own life, except that there's the problem of having people you like discover the body. No, religion doesn't enter into it for me; I was the first person on our block to give up God. Old age?" Suddenly she is acting, the Eccentric Sylvia, playing a good quote into the tape recorder, making a fashion show of age's sagging inevitability. "I see myself retreating s-l-o-w-l-y in layers of deep-piled fur, spun into yards and yards of chiffon, retreating until just the tip of my nose is showing..." About as successful an act of disappearance as the legendary Sasquatch parading down nearby Bloor Street.

Later I phone Fraser, to check on a couple of minor details. She is brisk, bubbling, co-operative. She has not bucked one question. The woman whose last novel is crammed with obscene acts and foul language does not utter a single "damn" through our long time together, doesn't smoke, and claims that she is, where morals are concerned, a very straight-laced lady. Her friends have described her as fun to be with, vulnerable, and warm.

But something more complex runs persistently, like a cool stream, through everything she says. Whatever compassion there is seems flawed by a certain remote ability to analyze, almost too well. Overriding her social warmth is a stern sense of self so strong that personal relationships inevitably appear to run a poor second. "I don't really believe in the test of time for family or friendships," she tells me in the firm, positive voice. "I am always changing, always shedding skins." Rationally and coolly, she has discussed shedding a family, shedding a husband, and shedding a few old friends. It is difficult to tell whether she really ever shed a tear. But the past may not have been all that easily "written out" after all.

As our final phone call draws to an end, I ask if I can call her again, in case something else occurs. Suddenly the old confident tone is gone, and her voice climbs to a light, childlike coo: "Oooookay," she pipes, "bye-bye." Perhaps it was a put-on, a joke. But it left the impression that Pandora, who made her something of a celebrity and surrounds her in the apartment, has never entirely left Sylvia Fraser.◁

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